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ABSTRACT

Gender inevitably influences intimacy. This paper examines how gender differences can inhibit intimate relationships. In the analysis of two cases, it was observed that the researcher unconsciously had a tendency to defer to male perspectives regarding intimacy, and suggests that many female clients may do the same. Researchers have speculated that women and men express themselves and respond differently: women strive toward relationship and mutuality, whereas men seek autonomy and authority. The key issue revolves around "voice." Frequently, society misrepresents a woman's voice--a metaphor to represent self-definition--deeming it ill-formed in some way. Women who desire increased mutuality and a deeper emotional connection with their partner should be encouraged and not be treated as aberrant. In the above cases, the men's incapacity or unwillingness to provide a context for the women's continued growth created difficulties. The men strove for independence, making the women seem cloying or needy. The women seemed unclear about what they wanted--their relational "selves" had been invalidated by a culture which emphasizes independence over relationship. It was found that even an effective therapist for these women can become caught up in the hopelessness of these women's implicit requests for greater mutuality and intimacy. (Contains 39 references.) (RJM)

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Can We Talk?
Case Studies Regarding Gender and Intimacy

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Abstract

Two case studies were originally selected to portray gender differences in definitions, needs for, and expressions of intimacy in heterosexual relationships. As the manuscript developed, however, the author's own struggles with gender biases within psychology began to parallel those of the clients described. The author concludes by challenging the concept of "independent" self (both personal and professional) and by demonstrating how gender constructs not only intimacy but professional relationships as well.

If you were the woman and I was the man
Would I send you yellow roses
Would I dare to kiss your hand?
Cowboy Junkies

Gender inevitably influences the expression of intimacy. In fact, women and men usually experience intimacy in different ways (Bergman & Surrey, 1992; Kantor & Okun, 1989; Osherson, 1991). According to Pollack and Gilligan (1982) men fear intimacy because it threatens independence, while women fear independence because it threatens intimacy.

Mindful of the biases involved in either overstating or understating gender difference (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988; 1990; Wilcox & Forrest, 1992), this writer demonstrates how gender differences regarding intimacy can create problems in relationships. Through the analysis of two case examples, the author points out her own (previously unconscious, but becoming conscious) tendency to defer to male perspectives regarding intimacy, and suggests that many female clients may do the same.

Intimacy, Sex, and Love

Levine (1991) believes the capacity for intimacy rests on three separate abilities: (1) knowing what one feels and thinks; (2) using words to express these thoughts and feelings; and (3) saying them to another person. In addition to self-expression, intimacy also requires obtaining a response. According to Levine (1992), under ideal circumstances the response conveys: (1) non-critical acceptance of what is said; (2) awareness of the importance of the moment to the speaker; and (3) understanding. Intimate partners need to feel as though they are heard and understood.

Both Gilligan (1982) and Levine (1991) suggest the motivation for self expression and response differs for women and men. This difference occurs because women generally strive toward relationship and mutuality, whereas men more often strive toward autonomy and authority (McClelland, 1975; Tannen 1990). This difference often causes misunderstanding between women and men.

Another source of misunderstanding concerns the relationship between intimacy and sex (Jacobson, 1989).

Time magazine recently called this confusion a chicken and egg dilemma (Gray, 1993). Which comes first, intimacy or sex? The answer may depend on gender.

Scarf (cited in Kantor, et al., 1989) states that for her emotional intimacy increases sexuality. She claims that trust is sexy. The opposite view, which attributes sexual interest to mystery, uncertainty and/or an intermittent reinforcement schedule is more prevalent in the psychological literature (Berscheid, 1983; Sternberg, 1987). However, intimacy does not equate with trust, nor does mystery preclude trust. Levine explains that "we gravitate toward our theoretical simplicities in our need to understand or create the illusion that we understand" (personal communication, June 4, 1993). Additionally, Levine wonders if Scarf understands the meaning of the word sexuality at all.

Yalom (1989) distinguishes between intimacy and falling in love. For Yalom, intimacy is a "giving to" not a "falling for." Both Yalom (1989) and Levine (1991) emphasize the psychological aspects of intimacy

over the physical. Thus, these men counter the cultural stereotype, whereby men simply equate intimacy with sex (Levant, 1990; Livermore, 1993).

In 1977 Klassen explained:

> In our euphemistic intellectual jungle swamp we may think intimacy means sex and/or sex means intimacy (p. 2).

But we would be wrong, he implies. He then articulates what he sees as gender related difficulties with romantic love. Conditioning teaches women to be sex objects and men to objectify them/us (see also Stoltenberg, 1990). And then, according to Klassen (1977), we strike a deal exchanging sex for intimacy or intimacy for sex. Under these conditions the intimacy is often lacking, and the sex is disappointing.

What has changed since 1977? Levant (1992) still identifies aggression as a core feature of masculinity. And although aggression is not always negative, McGrath (1992) and the APA task force on women and depression (McGrath, E., Keita, G., Strickland & Russo, 1990) report that over 50% of adult American women have had

at least one significant incident of physical or sexual abuse before the age of 21.

Returning to a female perspective, Weingarten (1991) stresses equality, reciprocity and the mutual construction of intimate moments in relationships. According to Weingarten, the accumulation of these mutually constructed intimate moments (which may or may not include either sex or self-expression) creates intimacy in relationships.

Voice

Intimacy requires voice, a metaphor used in feminist literature to represent self-definition (Ellsworth, 1989). Care and justice, examples of certain culturally developed voices, refer to how women and men often differ in approaching the moral dilemmas in their lives (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor 1988). For example, Brown and Gilligan (1990) suggested that women often speak the voice of care, alluding to love and closeness, while men speak the voice of justice, referring to fairness and equality in describing their moral concerns (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan (1982) and colleagues (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988; Brown,

Tapppan, Gilligan, Miller & Argyris, 1989) used these terms in regard to moral development. This author uses these terms more broadly (Twohey, 1992; Twohey & Volker, 1993; Twohey, 1993). In other words, care and justice can be used as constructs such as instrumentality/expressiveness, thinking/feeling, and relational/autonomous. Care and justice may overlap with such constructs, but should not be considered dichotomous. For example, an individual may speak in both voices simultaneously, expressing concerns about both care and justice. The following case examples will further illustrate these uses of the term voice in intimate heterosexual relationships.

Case Example

Anne

Two years ago a 19-year-old woman was referred for psychotherapy because she "took a bunch of pills." She was seen in a private practice setting once weekly for four months. Her sessions often focused on the relationship with her "boyfriend" Allen. Allen was described as a hockey player who went out often with

his friends, leaving her alone in the residence hall. Anne wanted to spend more time with him but thought it "only fair" for Allen to play hockey and to see his friends. She did not want to hold him back from his activities. She did not know why she took the pills.

After several sessions with Anne and a few with Anne and Allen, Anne said she had pulled out a gun the previous weekend and held it to her head. "I didn't want to kill myself," she pleaded. "I don't know why I did it. I'm not upset with Allen, I just have low self-esteem."

For many women, a primary relationship with a man can be a most important source of emotional security. As Levine (1991) proclaimed, psychological intimacy is "the glue of all important relationships...a powerful motivator of sexual expression, and an enhancer of self-esteem" (p. 259).

Anne reported no complaints at all about her sexual relationship with Allen. In fact, she rarely complained except about wishing to see him more often. And Anne did not deliberately withhold her true feelings in session (or with Allen). She simply knew

no true feelings to disclose (or so the therapist presumed).

Anne's seeming lack of self related to her personal and cultural history. The parental/cultural values which she seemed to have internalized (if they were truly internalized she may not have been suicidal) stressed independence over relationship. These values suggested to her that Allen "should" have been able to see his friends. These values could be equated with the voice of justice, per Carol Gilligan (1982). The voice of justice emphasizes independence, objectivity, equality and appeals to a sense of fairness in relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1990).

But did Anne really speak the voice of justice? After all, the voice of justice might have also called attention to Anne's rights in this relationship: a right to be heard and responded to, a right to have her needs considered, weighed and balanced in relationship to Allen's. Yet Anne seemed unwilling or unable to acknowledge her own needs in this relationship.

Voice is similar to assertiveness. But assertion may not imply self-definition, and voice may not result

from assertiveness training. If Anne had no self to assert, assertiveness training would not help her (Kegan, 1982). In fact, assertiveness training may be a fundamentally gender biased intervention, since the onus for change rests primarily with the speaker (oftentimes a woman).

Thus, treatment with Anne consisted of gently improving her relationship with Allen, rather than encouraging her to become more independent, differentiated or autonomous (as many theoretical perspectives suggest). At this writing, however, the author wonders if improving Anne's relationship with Allen was truly the therapeutic goal. Perhaps not, since the therapist's own concerns about insurance coverage, and her fears about Allen's potential non-participation easily dissuaded her from inviting him into therapy. In fact, in a letter to Anne's psychiatrist the psychotherapist wrote:

> I have had very little success in working with Anne. We could not seem to form an alliance. I wish we had been able to look more closely at her family relationships and

also to talk about her career plans [to help "define" her sense of self].

In other words, the therapist seemingly sacrificed her own perspective, her voice, by writing what she thought the male psychiatrist would want to hear--things about Anne's career, her family, etc. Women often associate professional power and privilege with men. Women often think they must second guess, and affirm these men to be allowed to practice their profession. At times, they must.

The psychotherapist initially conceptualized Anne's difficulties as lack of voice. Without voice Anne could not form a bond with Allen. But this interpretation had only obscured the problem. In retrospect, the lack of appropriate response from Allen only made it look as if Anne lacked voice.

The meaning of the term voice developed here includes the response of the person to whom the voice is speaking. A response indicates that one has been heard. If no one hears her, does Anne actually have voice? If Anne were a tree falling in the forest, could she be heard? Women like Anne have historically

been like trees falling in the forest in the way psychology has traditionally responded to them.

In addition to self-expression voice for Anne would have included the quality of Allen's response. It would have meant working therapeutically with both Anne and Allen until he could have heard her, understood her, and accepted her desire to be close to him, rather than seeing her as invading, intruding, or threatening his independence.

The psychotherapist conducted individual therapy with Anne, in an attempt to help her identify and give volume to her voice. Reanalysis suggests that she might have requested more from Allen. Now, it appears that confronting Allen was most likely Anne's only possibility of help. The therapist might have listened more closely for Anne's story, a story about her partners failure to respond. The therapist might also have listened more closely for Anne's voice, a voice speaking about fairness to her partner at the expense of fairness to herself. And the therapist might have also listened more closely for her own voice, a voice

encouraging this client's desire for mutuality and intimacy in her relationship.

Another Case Example

Sara

Sara, divorced and in her early forties, described herself as "co-dependant". She requested counseling initially because her partner, Ethan, was suicidal. After five months of psychotherapy she said:

> Well, that's the way he portrayed it...to say it was my fault, like he said I was too intense and when the relationship was too intense, that's what caused his suicide feelings. He said that last night. He said it was those intense situations that caused him to go out and drink.

And Sara wondered if Ethan might be right, that her intensity or neediness caused him to drink. She saw herself as extremely needy in this relationship.

In over two years of weekly sessions the psychotherapist had tried to challenge this belief. However, transcript analysis revealed that both Sara and the psychotherapist had actually encouraged the

"Sara as needy" point of view. In one transcript Sara proclaimed:

> You know what helped me the most last week? ...what helped me the most was when we were discussing about how I used to be when I was younger and how independent I was. And not continuing to think of myself in that co-dependent role. Because I placed myself in that role and I don't have to be there. I don't have to be there. And I think that helped me more than anything in that conversation with Ethan. I got myself up out of that brew and began thinking of myself as an individual...It's so stupid because when I was younger, and the whole time, my whole premise has been individuality. I've thrived on that. I've loved that.

This quote calls to mind Brown's (1989) work on the psychological development of girls. Here, an adult woman stated exactly what Brown had described: a girl "no longer knowing what she knew" as she matured (Brown, 1989; Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

It now appears that "thinking of herself in that co-dependant role" was not the problem. In a sense, she did "have to be there". When therapists ignore potential gender differences regarding intimacy, the female version often remains unknown, undervalued, or misunderstood. A women's preference for mutuality can be easily mistaken for dependency.

The therapist's permission for and encouragement of Sara's own voice in this relationship, a voice desiring increased mutuality and a deeper emotional connection with her partner, if she could have given it, would have been a more therapeutic goal. Alone, however, and without support from either the culture or her partner, one psychotherapist could not give Sara voice. In this sense, the therapist's own dilemma mirrored the dilemma of her client.

Sara maintained periodic contact with the psychotherapist subsequent to her two years of therapy. In time, Sara ended her relationship with Ethan, established a new career, and began a new relationship.

Anne and Sara: "She's Stealing My Emotions"

Both Sara and Anne had been conditioned to establish their identity through their relationships. In addition, Allen and Ethan's incapacity or unwillingness to provide a context for Anne and Sara's continued growth caused difficulties. These men, and the culture as a whole, failed to validate the womens' relational selves. Rather than suggesting that the men should have functioned as cocoons for Anne and Sara, the author suggests that their relationships might have improved with increased mutuality (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver & Surrey, 1991). If Allen had realized that within Anne's growth lay possibilities for his own development, he might have been more responsive, providing a more fertile ground for her attempts at relationship building. As it was, she was trying to build a life-sustaining relationship in a desert. Likewise for Sara in her relationship with Ethan.

In spite of the many differences between Sara and Anne (e.g. age, education, family background and experience) the therapist saw these two clients as very much alike. For both women, a primary relationship

with a man became problematic. For both women, increased connection and commitment were desired. For both women, a sense of personal identity seemed elusive. Anne had very little sense of self apart from her relationship with Allen, and Sara repeatedly compromised what sense of self she had to stay in relationship with Ethan. Brown and Gilligan (1992) would suggest that both women repeatedly took themselves out of relationship for the sake of the relationship.

Beyond relationship, these women seemed unclear about what they wanted. But they did not lack a sense of self. Rather, their relational "selves" had been invalidated by a culture which emphasizes independence over relationship, and the voice of justice over care (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Jack, 1991). In Sara's more recent words:

> I believe women like Gilligan [1982], Jack [1991] and you [Twohey] are doing much to explain why this ridiculous cycle keeps going on. I am encouraged by women who are defining a sense of self separate from and in

> addition to their relationship self and forcing men to assume a more responsible position within relationships. I feel that I have to stop feeling and emoting for the man or men in my life and stop and listen to the first words of intimacy that come awkwardly from their mouths.

"Feeling and emoting for the man or men in my life" -- engages the time and energy of many women. John (who may also speak for Sara's partner, Ethan), described the same problem from another gendered perspective:

> It has become quite difficult for me to express my emotions to my wife for mainly one reason. When I feel angry, depressed or hurt and try to tell my wife how I feel, she immediately assumes that same emotion. If I am angry about work she, too, will become angry. Or, if I am depressed about certain events, she will begin depressing, also. In other words, I feel that she is 'stealing' my emotions from me and not allowing me to have

> them for myself. This, for me, is very frustrating.

John eventually began to realize that "stealing his emotions" was his wife's idea of supporting him. He still maintained, however, that the primary benefit was to her rather than to him. This benefit he described as "helping her to fulfill her part of the relationship". Nevertheless, he claimed to "find it stifling and it makes me very reluctant to discuss certain things with her. I know this seems quite absurd, but it is the way I feel."

Another client, Mary described a similar dilemma from the perspective of a woman. She said:

> When my husband gets mad at something (e.g. working in the garage and the project gets messed up) he yells. When he does that, it triggers a response in me. I feel responsible for what happened. I think I will be blamed, or that somehow, I could have prevented it.

Later she elaborated:

> ...I think marriage does kindle a woman's desire to support and enhance the relationship, and that's why when things are bad we express a more non-intrusive (in our woman minds) emotion like fear, whining or sadness. Because we think it won't threaten the relationship as much.

From a male perspective, Levant (1992) would say that Sara, Anne, and Mary should all understand the dilemmas men have with connection and self-expression, while at the same time helping them to accept their needs for emotional intimacy. But a colleague (Rankin personal communication, July 1993), wondered why mention Levant at all? Sara makes this point herself when she says:

> I [previously] saw difficulty in relationships as all mine. My problem was thinking 'idealistically' about all men and not recognizing they could have problems of their own (personal correspondence, 5/26/93).

As a female therapist who identified strongly with the value these women placed on their relationships, this author found herself to be generally effective as a therapist. However the author also became caught up at various times in the hopelessness of these womens' implicit requests for greater mutuality and intimacy in their relationships. As Marlin Potash stated in her 1992 invited address to the American Psychological Association, "Women have been waiting, waiting, and are still waiting for what they need from men." The time has come to hear and validate these women's requests. One can do so by fully acknowledging the importance of emotionally intimate relationships to psychological health--for both women and for men.

If I was the woman and you were the man
would I laugh if you came to me
with your heart in your hand
and said, I offer you this freely
and will give you all that I can
because you are the woman
and I am the man?

Cowboy Junkies

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